

Spying at home

Research

Dr M G Michael, studies the social implications of technology, including the way governments can use it to intrude on the lives of citizens.

The term "überveillance" means an exaggerated surveillance of citizens, an above and beyond omnipresent 24/7 version using tracking technologies which are embedded within the body. Think of it as Big Brother on the inside, looking out.

It is an emerging area of information and communications technology which preoccupies me.

However, if the powers behind some of the intrusive surveillance technologies which I am studying do not pause to consider both the trajectory and consequences of the new "machinery" they are building, then we are in for a bumpy ride and the effects will potentially be catastrophic.

I am not a naysayer per se, but that's how I see things as they now stand.

This is not to say that technology is not affording us some amazing and groundbreaking possibilities, especially in the areas of biomedics, communications and, of course, business information systems.

I am certainly not a neo-Luddite. But I do not buy into the glossy and predictably misleading publicity of where this "computer age" is supposedly taking us. I genuinely doubt, based on past and present evidence, that we are about to enter the cornucopia of an electric world.

On a more positive note, our work is about promoting discourse among the academic disciplines, the various sectors of the community and the public itself which is a critical and significant stakeholder in this

discussion which is shaping both our immediate future and the civilisation to come.

I have been contemplating the social implications of technology from within an apocalyptic framework and narrative for almost 25 years, and have travelled the world during that time listening and speaking to recognised experts in their respective fields.

This group includes both religious persons and those who are firmly fixed to the empirical side of things. It is a truly extraordinary and revealing mix.

People might be surprised with some of the points of agreement. There are several strong connections between the desert and city that we often altogether miss, or choose to ignore.

My research focus extends to:

- ❑ modern interpretations of scripture and the Apocalypse of John;
- ❑ the historical antecedents of modern cryptography;
- ❑ the auto-ID trajectory;
- ❑ überveillance and Big Brother;
- ❑ auto-ID trajectory;
- ❑ data protection, privacy and ethics-related issues;
- ❑ biometrics, radio frequency identification and chip implants;
- ❑ national security and government policy;
- ❑ and more broadly the system dynamics between technology and society.

Each one of these subjects intensely fascinates me. There is a noticeable cross-disciplinary



Dr M G Michael with his new book *From Dataveillance to Überveillance and the Realpolitik of the Transparent Society*. Picture: ANDY ZAKELI

indication here; we are finding this more and more in perceived "monolithic" disciplines such as engineering and computer science.

My passion extends to teaching, writing papers, and presenting at conferences. But particularly teaching, above all else.

I have been invited to present at international conferences and have published a number of papers in the disciplines of IT, bioethics, and biblical studies.

More recently we have been given the honour to deliver a paper in the high profile 29th International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners which was held in Canada, alongside such

keynotes as Michael Chertoff, Secretary, US Department of Homeland Security. Dr MG Michael is an honorary fellow at the University of Wollongong's School of Information Systems and Technology.

Germany's war wound

Germany may have brought the world aspirin, rocket science, quantum physics and the diesel engine, but its days of scientific glory are long gone and it is now hunting for a new generation of Einsteins.

Decades of underfunding and a distaste for the elitism nurtured by Nazis has meant the world's third-largest economy is trailing its global competitors, causing concern among business leaders and provoking warnings from economists.

With only five universities in the US-dominated top 100 - the University of Munich is highest at 48 - Germany has launched a scheme to compete for funding and create its own "Ivy League".

Two Nobel prizes awarded last month to Germans - a physicist and a chemist - has revived pride in the country's scientific heritage.

But those wins provide little comfort.

Between 1901 and 1931, German universities and institutes produced 15 Nobel Prize winners in chemistry and 10 in physics - more than any other country.

German companies are proud of the part they played in establishing Germany's reputation as a scientific powerhouse.

German children still learn about chemist Felix Hoffmann, who invented aspirin at Bayer in 1897, and Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz whose work on the first vehicle to be powered by an internal combustion engine led to car manufacturer Daimler Benz AG.

After World War II, a backlash against the Nazi ethic of natural selection and survival of the fittest, universities have focused on equality rather than individual excellence.

"The egalitarian approach, born of a fear of elitism after the war, worked well in many ways but people forgot you can't train everyone to get a Nobel prize," said Stefan Treue, director of the German Primate Centre, an institute in Goettingen which works closely with the university.

These factors coupled with funding shortages - the United States spends almost twice as much of its gross domestic product on higher education as Germany - has contributed to a brain drain.

MADELINE CHAMBERS, Reuters

Q&A

Best part of your research?

Sharing my work in class with my students at the University of Wollongong and listening to what they have to say; meeting and exchanging ideas with colleagues both locally and internationally; working closely with my wife, Dr Katina Michael, who is the driving force behind this funded research collaboration; and educating and regularly surprising myself with new bits of information and knowledge.

What did you want to be when

you were a kid? Lots of things! One of these, the dream to become a policeman, I actually fulfilled for a short period. I also liked to make believe that my bedroom was a spaceship and that I was an astronaut taking off into the heavens, heading for the Moon.

Has your career followed a straight line? Positively not. I found myself in the IT world through an unbelievable twist of fate. I really am the proverbial "accidental tourist". In previous incarnations I have been a police officer, high-school teacher, soldier, and clergyman. I have

moved about a bit and have found that institutional hierarchies and I do not always see eye-to-eye. I have a habit of asking too many questions! But there are other things which I think matter a whole lot more, and those things I have tried to let follow a straight line. However, like most people, I do not always succeed.

What would you change? Ten years ago I probably would have said quite a few things; and five years prior to that a whole lot more. But I have increasingly come to the realisation that providence really does know best, and that all things

do work together for good. We just need to hang in there.

Advice for young researchers: Passion for your work; endurance in reaching your goals; humility with your successes; and the desire to become "builders". Also to read as many books as you can, to make this a life-long habit. Be predisposed to biographies. And to make sure that you surround yourselves with suitably qualified mentors.

Next adventure: Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero. (Seize the day, trust least to the future).

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